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Great Places tag granted to 3 projects

State program pledges to help communities' plans get rolling

By TIM HIGGINS
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Some of Iowa's great places might one day include the nation's tallest lighthouse and an eco-tourism area with some of the country's darkest skies for star watchers.

Proposed community projects in Clinton, Coon Rapids and Sioux City were selected Monday by the state's new Great Places board to become pilot programs, making the groups eligible for special state assistance and services.

The Great Places project is supposed to cut red tape and make it easier for grass-roots and community groups to get help from current state programs.

The citizen advisory board culled three communities and their ideas from 74 projects Monday:

- Clinton is proposing a multitude of projects along 12 miles of riverfront in a program called "Even More Things To Do With A River View," including building a lighthouse on the Mississippi River that would serve as the tallest observation tower in Iowa. At more than 194 feet, it would be the tallest lighthouse in the nation. The plan also talks about a sawmill with interactive exhibits, campsites and a boardwalk.

The city has already been

awarded \$3.3 million through the state's Vision Iowa program to help pay for a \$22.4 million downtown project that includes a new aquatic center, skate park, marina and trail.

- Coon Rapids and the Whiterock Conservancy proposed 10 community projects that would provide infrastructure for a new nature conservancy and encourage development in the city. Advisory board members expressed interest in the community's efforts to pass lighting ordinances to protect the area's dark night skies to attract astronomers.

- Sioux City proposed a plan involving five portions of the city's downtown in an effort to revitalize the area and better connect it with the nearby riverfront and stockyards. The city has already been awarded \$21 million from Vision Iowa for the \$70 million Tyson Events Center project.

The Great Places program was introduced by Gov. Tom Vilsack earlier this year. He will officially announce the three pilot projects later this month at a Great Places conference in Iowa City.

Monday's winners don't necessarily walk away with a big state check, unlike

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projects that have received money from other state cultural programs such as Vision Iowa.

Instead, the projects' organizers will work with officials from various state agencies to target current resources and tap into them for the projects.

In Coon Rapids, community leaders said they don't know what to expect but are excited.

"I am really pleased. Whiterock Conservancy and Coon Rapids have tremendous potential," said Rachel Garst of the Whiterock Conservancy. She and her family have pledged to donate 5,000 acres of land to create the conservancy to be a public park that focuses on the environment.

Garst said the Coon Rapids project could benefit from help to get the park's infrastructure in place.

Advisory board member Amanda Styron of Mount Pleasant said she pushed this project because it was already well-planned and ready to go, as were the other two programs. "The help from the state will get this from something that's good to something that is amazing," she said.

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